



Spectres of Seurat (Or, Seurat versus Duchamp) • ERIC ALLIEZ

SPECTRES OF SEURAT (OR, SEURAT VERSUS DUCHAMP)



'You find colour in the Andelys, but I see the Seine.

Almost indefinable, grey sea, even in the strongest sunlight, with a blue sky.'

Georges Seurat, to Paul Signac

'They see poetry in what I do. No – I apply my method, and that is all.'

Seurat, to Charles Angrand

'The possible is an infra-thin. The possibility of many tubes of colours becoming a Seurat is the concrete "explanation" of the possible as infra-thin.'

Duchamp, Notes, note¹

To interrogate that which in modern art does not belong to pictorial modernism but, on the contrary, might, by way of a thinking of forces rather than of forms, provide material for an archeology of contemporary art – a contemporaneity for which, in my view, Matisse and Duchamp constitute the two points of entry and the fundamental paradigms – such is among the basic contentions of this research project, which comprises two published parts: *La Pensée-Matisse*²; and *L'Oeil-Cerveau*³, subtitled *New Histories of Modern Painting* (2007). This research is currently being developed via a more direct confrontation with Duchamp's work, as well as with those modalities in accordance with which the latter was able to deploy and radicalize an 'extreme modernity' aimed at undoing what Jean-Claude Bonne and I have called 'the image-form and the aesthetic-form of art'⁴.

We might begin with a fairly cardinal example, by inscribing the famous ***Nude Descending a Staircase no.2 in the shadow cast by, if not in a direct descendance from that other scandalous nude, ***Olympia. But Seurat's ***Poseuses provides a far more decisive instance here. For with Seurat, art catches up with mechanically abetted reproduction (exemplified by the photograph), but does so in a way that is profoundly different from Manet – a phenomenon whose full significance Duchamp will take the measure of. Whereas in Manet's painting the photographic indexes an overexposure effect (the cold overexposure proper to the vacuity of an image which no longer 'images' anything except for the most obscene exposure of the commercial exchange revealed by painting), in Seurat, by way of contrast, the photographic pertains more radically still to the mode of production of the image, which he subjects to a new and even more profound pictorial destitution. For commercial exchange affects the becoming-image of the nude de-posed under the title of *Poseuses* – a title that announces a reality-principle which excludes all aesthetic pleasure. Should we be surprised, then, that Duchamp took the full measure of Seurat's importance? Recall that Duchamp says of Seurat that he 'interests me more than Cézanne'⁵; that he was 'the only man in the past whom I really respected'. And furthermore, that '[t]he greatest scientific spirit of the nineteenth century, greater in this sense than Cézanne, is Seurat [...]'⁶.

¹. Trans. Paul Matisse (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1983).

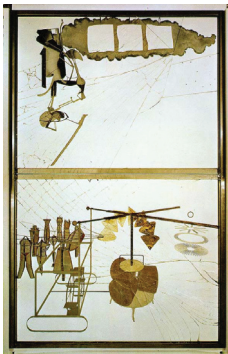
². E. Alliez & J.-C. Bonne, *La Pensée-Matisse: Portrait de l'artiste en hyperfauve* (Paris: Le Passage, 2005).

³. E. Alliez (avec la collaboration de J.-C. Martin), *L'Oeil-Cerveau: Nouvelle histoires de la peinture moderne* (Paris: Vrin, 2007). The book includes a chapter on Seurat ('Temps gris à la Grande-Jatte (l'Extraterrestre / Seurat / l'Œil-Machine)').

⁴. E. Alliez & J.-C. Bonne, 'Défaire l'image', *Multitudes* 28, 2007.

⁵. Cabanne, *Dialogues*, op.cit., 93

⁶. 'A Complete Reversal of Art Opinions by Marcel Duchamp, Iconoclast', in *Art and Decoration*, Sept. 1915, reprinted in *Studio International* 189, 973 (Jan-Feb 1975): 29.



Thierry de Duve has devoted some remarkable pages to the relations between Seurat and Duchamp in his *Pictorial Nominalism* (subtitled *Duchamp's Passage from Painting to Ready-Made*)⁷, as well as in his *Résonances du ready-made*⁸. But de Duve's analysis basically relies upon Duchamp's explicit comments about Seurat. My approach here differs from De Duve's in two ways:

First, my point of departure will not be Duchamp's remarks about Seurat but rather Seurat's painting as such (particularly *Poseuses*), as well as some of his remarks (his hastily scribbled notes), and we will compare what we take to be the relevant elements of these works or notes to certain of Duchamp's own notes, which are not primarily or exclusively about Seurat but seem to echo him. We must say a few words to justify this comparison between Duchamp's 'Notes' and Seurat's work. According to Seurat's contemporaries, his painting can be considered to be a 'theoretical' body of work precisely insofar as he applied his method and painted his theory — a theory that he described as a 'chromoluminarism'. Now, the scientific basis for Seurat's reflections on colour theory was provided by Charles Blanc's 1867 *Grammaire des arts du dessin* [Grammar of the Arts of Drawing] — whose chapter on 'Painting' focused on 'the law of colour contrasts' put forward by Chevreul — and by Ogden Rood in his *Modern Chromatics: Students' Text-Book of Color*, translated into French in 1881 as *Théorie scientifique des couleurs et de leurs applications à l'art et à l'industrie*. Seurat also sought confirmation for the idea of the expressiveness of colours and lines in Charles Henry's essays on scientific aesthetics. Thus, it is at the time of these 'scientific' speculations on colour that Seurat's work comes to be regarded as belonging more to the scientific laboratory than to the artist's studio — and thereby condemned for its 'positivism'. /// As for Duchamp's notes, they are remarks about the intellectual as well as technical aspects of a vast project entitled ****The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, also known as the *Large Glass*. The notes become less frequent once the construction of the *Large Glass* begins, and stop completely in 1921 or 1922 (they become supplanted by interviews)⁹. Thus, there is a complete break between conception and execution. With regard to the latter, Duchamp declares: 'It was not an original work, it was the copy of an idea, an execution, a technical execution, like a pianist executing a piece of music of which he is not the composer. It is the same thing with this glass: it was merely the execution of an idea'¹⁰; which in turn meant that it was necessary to 'consult the book and [to] view the two together'¹¹. With this verbal bias marrying the *Bride* to those Notes which state the conditions of possibility for an image that will only ever be seen by 'imaginary eyes'¹², and with the medium of language as the work's fourth dimension, it is impossible to imagine a more complete rupture with Matisse's fauvist thought, which espouses the inseparability of conception and execution in a self-making whose motor is anti-aesthetic qua energetic. In Duchamp's Notes, we come to the full realization of the scriptural and in-aesthetic dimension of the work conceived as a *cosa mentale*, which was supposed to be accompanied by inscriptions and by a text which never took shape (but whose 'extra-sensory' status can be grasped through the Notes).

7. Translated by Dana Polan, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991).

8. Published in English as Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 7 of T. de Duve's *Kant After Duchamp* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996).

9. P. Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, trans. R. Padgett (London: Thames & Hudson, 1971).

10. Interview with Harriet and Sidney Janis in 1953; quoted in de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, 173.

11. Cabanne, *Dialogues*, op.cit., 43.

12. M. Duchamp, R. Hamilton, E. Bonk, à l'infinif / in the infinitive. trans. J. Matisse, R. Hamilton, E. Bonk. (the typographic society, 1999), 53.



The basis for the comparison of Seurat and Duchamp here is the idea that Seurat's work bears the same relation to what we might call the 'pictorial mentalism' that is immanent to his practice, as Duchamp's 'notes', in their own way, bear to the deliberate 'pictorial nominalism' of his major work, the Large Glass. And it is precisely this 'mental' affinity with Seurat, who promulgated the conception of the work as a *cosa mentale* (in a sense to be rendered more precise below), to which Duchamp was particularly sensitive.

Yet my aim here will also be to show that there is a tension or ambivalence in Seurat's painting, one that allows it to be paradoxically inscribed within the horizon of fauvism – and which Matisse had already picked up on: 'I have [...] been able to supplement Gauguin's theory with Seurat's theory of contrasts, of the simultaneous reactions of colours and the relation of their luminosity'¹³. If Gauguin must be supplemented and corrected by Seurat, it is because Gauguin 'lacks a construction of space by means of colour, which latter he employs as an expression of feelings' – this being the reason why Gauguin cannot be 'counted among the Fauves'. Whereas Seurat – and this statement finds a strange echo in Duchamp – 'uses [...] a scientifically organized matter, reproducing and presenting before our eyes objects constructed through scientific means rather than through signs based upon feelings'. Matisse concludes from this that 'Seurat is the complete opposite of a Romantic'. Yet for Matisse, it is also necessary to correct Seurat through the dynamism of Gauguin's flat colour planes, since Seurat's scientific divisionism of points lends 'to his works a positivist aspect, a stability that is a little inert because of his composition'. But in an interview with Tériade in 1929, at the very moment that Matisse harshly criticizes neo-impressionist divisionism in the name of the fauvist practice of flat colour planes, he also paradoxically makes an exception for what he himself calls Seurat's 'grey canvases'. It is as though Matisse foresaw how, despite the grisaille effect for which they were constantly denigrated, Seurat's works resulted from a quantitative science of colour-light ('chromoluminarism'), which had to be distinguished from its more and more explicitly qualitative interpretation in the neo-impressionism of a Signac or a Cross. Thus, Matisse and Duchamp are both advocates of a certain Seuratian science. And it is from this science that we must set out in order to examine the point where Matisse and Duchamp diverge from and in (de/dans) Seurat.

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***Seurat's *Poseuses*, oil on canvas, 1886-88, 200.5cm x 250.5 cm. This is a very large canvas – and one of the neo-impressionists' objections will be on this very ... point. In his journal of 1897, Paul Signac noted à propos of the *Poseuses*: 'It is too divided, the brushstrokes are too small [...] It makes this fine paintwork look mechanical and too small [...] The technique [...] lends the whole a greyish tone'¹⁴. It is in order to confront this question that, from 1895 onwards, Signac – who had appointed himself spokesman for the movement – would, together with Henry Edmond Cross, become the advocate of a second wave of neo-impressionism.

¹³. H. Matisse, *Écrits et propos sur l'art*, ed. D. Fourcade (Paris:Hermann 1972), 94.

¹⁴. Paul Signac's *Journal*, 28 December 1897 (our emphasis) (P. Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionisme* (Paris, 1899; republished Hermann, Paris, 1978), 21) . Influenced by the recent publication of Delacroix's *Journal*, Signac began to keep his journal in 1894.

Through an extended pointillism, using colours 'as sold in tubes, by shopkeepers'¹⁵ — a statement whose ultimate consequences Duchamp will draw by turning the commercially sold tube of colour into the paradigm of the ready-made — one contradicts de facto Félix Fénéon's claim that 'at the right distance, the facture disappears in the optical mixture'¹⁶. The result being that 'the divided brushstroke must be proportionate to the dimensions of the work', so that the point becomes absolutely ruled out for large formats¹⁷ — and hence for those 'large machines' that characterize what Seurat called his 'great canvases of struggle' such as *Poseuses*.

Thus, through a singular paradox, pointillism only comes to be affirmed in modern art by wrong-footing its inventor, when the latter claimed to be merely applying a 'method' ... And how could it have been otherwise, given the extent to which the theory that Seurat paints seemed fated to envelop painting in 'a vast Memento Mori' translating the structural evidence of a Visual isolated from Nature (and any form of natural visible) as well as from the sparkle of pure colour? Signac's parricide vis-à-vis Seurat is a necessary condition to project neo-impressionism as a moment essentially 'preparatory' to modernism understood as the liberation of expression by means of 'pure colour'. This is a liberation with regard to the theory of optical mixture, with regard to what Thierry de Duve, speaking of Seurat, calls 'the constitution of a digitalized code of the visible' connecting 'the atomic components of the light-image' to 'its reconstitution in the eye of the spectator'¹⁸. Except that, for Seurat, the first condition of the effect of 'generalized discontinuity' as 'radioactive', is that hues do not fuse with each other on the surface, but on the contrary — and in opposition to the dissolvent schema of 'optical mixture' — the visibility of the facture is emphasized to the point where it melds with the most visually elementary possible form of sensation; one that is apt to render sensible and visible vision's mental mode of production through the summation of sensations. As a result of this artificial discontinuity, vision calls for motor activity, for an incessant and never definitive pinpointing by the 'viewer' who makes the painting. On this point, there is an unmistakable rapprochement with Duchamp's formula according to which 'it is the viewers who make the picture'.

We must pause here for a moment to consider ***Seurat's conté crayon works. The graphite blackens the white of the paper, which remains visible in between the dark marks irregularly retained by its uneven grain. From contrasts arising not from the line but from rubbings alone emerge these 'evanescent forms', static and spectrally blurred, combining geometric simplification with progressive flattening, frequently evoking figures that are isolated or arrested, in an 'instantaneous state of rest' (according to Duchamp's famous expression)¹⁹, and hence suspended in an atomic existence devoid of narrative contours, obeying 'the mechanics of effects alone' (Georges Duthuit).

15. M. Denis, 'Préface à l'exposition Henri-Edmond Cross' (22 Avril–8 May 1907), reprinted in *Théories* (Paris: 1912); republished in M. Denis, *Le Ciel at l'Arcadie*, ed. J.-P. Bouillon (Paris: Hermann, 1993), 125.

16. F. Fénéon, 'Le néo-impressionisme', *L'art Moderne*, 1 May 1887; republished in F. Fénéon, *Au-delà de l'impressionisme*, introduction by F. Cachin (Paris: Hermann, 1966), 93: '[...] Two steps back — and all these variegated colours merge themselves into undulating luminous masses; the facture, one might say, vanishes.'

17. P. Signac, *D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionisme*, op.cit., 121, 122. In his *Journal*, on the date of the previously cited passage, he will write: 'I attach more and more importance to the purity of the brushstroke, and I try to give it its maximum purity and intensity; it is this love of the fine hue which makes us paint like this, not a taste for the "point".'

18. T. de Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, op.cit., 172.

19. See *Salt Seller: The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, ed. M. Sanouillet, E. Peterson. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), 27.

In this drawing driven by what Françoise Cachin describes as ‘an impersonal hand modulating every possible image of incommunicability and absence’, the eye initially perceives only a contradictory optical architecture combining the illuminating function of white with the colouring function of black. ‘An automat transcribes its incomparable scenes’, those scenes seen by the Eye-Machine of an extra-terrestrial ‘half-lost in the acetylene fog’ (Duthuit again)²⁰; an eye that would have invested the mechanical eye or ‘artificial retina’²¹ of the photographic apparatus with its speculative projection so as to make its images return like the spectres they are, and that every image has been ever since the first photograph: a real that can no longer be touched (just an image).

In other words: Seurat’s extra-terrestrial gaze, which more than one critic has remarked upon, presents itself as the spectre of the invention of photography; that automatic art which, so it was thought, would submit light to ‘tests that are independent of [the quality of] our sensations’, and which, in Chevreul’s hands, would uncover what Niepce de Saint-Victor described as ‘a new action of light at the molecular scale,’ from which will be deduced a new property of matter, radioactivity. With these developments in mind, I affirm that Seurat is the only painter of his generation to be the absolutely contemporary of this invention of photography. Thus, Duchamp could not but be impressed by Seurat’s Eye-Machine, by the automated anonymity of its recording, by the practice of art as technological experimentation, by the radioactivity that suffuses the corpuscular nature of light in Seurat’s crayon works. It might be fitting to recall here that *The Milky Way* – the upper part of the ***Large Glass – was originally to have been a giant photograph, a photosensitive glass plate.

It is as though the spectrality of those of Seurat’s drawings that fasten upon the ordinary aspects of modern life in order to bring out its drabness [grisaille] came about as a result of the experimentation through which the painter took into account the effects of the daguerrotype as defined by Arago: ‘In M. Daguerre’s paintings and copies [and Arago is talking here about daguerrotypes...], just as in a drawing in black crayon, or, better still (the simile will be more exact), as in mezzotints [engravings in the “black manner”], there is nothing but white, black, and grey; but light, darkness, and intermediate tones.’

It is this experiment that Seurat will develop graphically in his visual cut-outs by investing both the most material aspect of ‘art’ photographs in their fibrous texture and granular structure, and the most spectral conception of a universal photographic ‘influence’ composing (according to Nadar’s summary of Balzac’s ‘Theory of Spectres’) ‘each body in nature [...] from series of spectres, in layers superimposed to infinity, interleaved in infinitesimal films in every direction where optics perceives this body’²². Seurat as seer, physicist and optician, in a strange and inevitable alliance between ‘materialism’ and ‘spiritism’ (the ‘subtle matter’ that was to make such a powerful impression on Duchamp), alliance that is rendered immediately perceptible by the least of Seurat’s conté crayon works, by their constant affinity with the printed photographic negative, and by their refusal of impressionist solutions directed against the ‘shortcomings’ of photography.

20. G. Duthuit, « Georges Seurat, voyant et physicien » (1946) ; republished in G. Duthuit, *Représentation et présence. Premiers écrits et travaux (1923-1952)* (Paris : Flammarion, 1974), 324.

21. Thus wrote the theoretician of optics Jean-Baptiste Biot in a scientific note added to the account of the session of 7 January 1839 where Arago presented Daguerre’s discovery to the Academie des sciences.

22. Nadar, *Quand j’étais photographe* (Paris, 1900 ; republished Paris: Seuil, 1994), 15 ; see Balzac, *Le Cousin Pons*, chap.



There is a striking novelty to these 'pictograms of the actual', these 'icons of the concrete', resolutely informed upon Seurat's artistic plate²³ (the 'extra-photographic plate' evoked by the critic Max Weller in 1888) through the paradigmatic usage of the photographic apparatus which became dominant after 1870, when, rather than being connected to a type of image and the question of its nature, the notion of photography will henceforth refer above all to a productive process, to an economy of production that is at once optical and chemical, and in which the experimental method figures as a grey ontology at work within the positivist current, while images are constituted as composite assemblages reconciling the psychic and the physiological in an Eye-Brain.

Henceforth, there will be production of the image only on condition that it renders visible the new relation of production that it mediates: the montage of the painting as screen for a world that is always-already image and which thereby reduces the painting to a reproduction of a worldless image (in accordance with the principle of the general expansion of the image insofar as it incorporates in a Visual the entire sphere of the visible by precipitating the disappearance of things-in-themselves as they were in-forming the natural perception). Accordingly, if optical mixture takes place, it is as a visual collage: the in-different collage of spots of colours on the canvas, which, in their overlapping, repel quantitatively the penetration of the gaze confronted with the least atmospheric images imaginable. *** Le Chenal de Gravelines 1890 (Parenthesis: like every form of 'retinal' naturalism, atmospherism is also one of the things that Duchamp's art, in its 'beauty of indifference', categorically refuses). Whence the paintings' restitution of the grey irradiation of the crayon works; that power of greyness which, black-on-white, provides the basis for their 'optical formula', erecting point by point the image-idea of a subject without subjectivity, monumental in its disenchanting banality. This is indeed the best definition of a Spectre, as well as the most rigorous way of registering the spectral condition that menaces painting in the age of photography, the latter being the invention-revolution (the so-called "photographic revolution") which transforms the general character of the art-object in its 'making'.

Is all that remains for painting, then, to express the disenchantment of the world and the dystopia of modernity's promises by using and abusing its own codes?

In Seurat's mind, in any case, there is nothing for it but to plunge oneself into this age whose supreme modernity signifies the absencing of things and beings (industrial suburbs, Sundays at the Grand Jatte, café-concerts, circus parades ...); to reach that point where, in Yshaghpour's formulation, 'between imagery and the mental thing, the visible can no longer exist'. Thus, it will be a question of visioning and synthesizing this in-visible as the artifice of a visual which brings along with it the most artificial image of painting as that which can no longer be anything but a *cosa mentale*, and which will consequently be so absolutely, in conformity with Rimbaud's imperative to be 'absolutely modern', which is indissociable here from Duchamp's admiration for Seurat.

23. The expression 'artistic plate' appears from the pen of Max Weller in his account of the hanging of neo-impressionist canvases at the Salon des XX in Brussels (M. Weller, 'Le Salon des XX', *L'artiste*, May 1888). He goes on to evoke an 'extra-photographic plate'.

To that end, it will be necessary to evacuate the visible world of all natural and terrestrial colour; to convert it completely into the black-and-white grain of the image obtained through photo-graphic reduction; and then, on the basis of the image's complete dependence on light, to develop colour according to a photo-chemistry whose effects are strictly determined by its points as its primary or 'discrete' elements – the regulation of the gradation of tones (i.e. of reciprocal values of black and white) overdetermining the relationships between hues. It is worth highlighting here some of Seurat's thoughts on this matter in his 'letter to Maurice Beaubourg' of 1890, in which he sums up his technique and his aesthetic, and which invites a comparison with Matisse. Seurat begins by establishing that there must be an 'analogy' (of contraries or similarities) between the three principal pictorial means, namely tones, hues and lines – where 'tone' is the quantity of shadow or light, 'hue' (teinte) is the quality of colour, and 'line' or rather 'direction' is vectoriality – considered in relation to the 'dominant' (intensive differential) and 'conditioned by a lightening' i.e. a 'lightening colour'. Analogy implies the idea of a differential ordering of the colours of a painting as conditioned by the quantity of light. 'The synthesis is imposed as resultant', adds Seurat, in a formula typical of a constructivism which we will here call 'luminarist' since it is founded on 'the laws of contrast' of light and shadow, on 'degradation' and 'irradiation'. In the 1887 'study-sheet' we find the expression 'composition of forces', and 'decomposition of the spectrum'. Then comes the word 'abstraction', followed by an arrow indicating the finality of the abstract composition of forces, namely, 'the agreeable and the disagreeable'. The latter indexes an energizing conception of pictorial composition which can also be called 'dynamogenic', since according to the theory which Seurat takes over from a schema by Superville, it is the proper combinations of the three principal pictorial means – tones, hues and lines – that stimulates sensations of pleasure or sadness, and drawn beneath the words 'pleasure' and 'pain', we find a little diagram consisting of a parallelogram of the composition of forces. Thus, we are dealing here with an energetic constructivism; but one whose determination, at once psychological and symbolic (through the influence of Superville and Henry), can be considered as theoretically reductive in relation to Matisse's vitalist anti-psychological energetics. [***Paysage a Collioure]. Moreover, Seurat's conception of the colour-point as a minimal extensive unit, which, in his mind, was supposed to render the intensive strictly controllable, prevented him from endowing the quantity of colour with an intensity that would be proportional to its extension into planes and the expansiveness we find in Matisse. It is interesting here to transpose, without conflation, the question of the tonal overdetermination of hue in Seurat into what Matisse sees as the intimate relation between the black and white sketch and colour. As Matisse stated in 1945: 'What is most important in colour are relations. Thanks to them and to them alone a drawing can be intensely coloured without there being any need to add colour to it'²⁴. We must understand that for Matisse the quantitative relations between black and white produce the equivalent of the intensive relations between colours, following the fauvist principle whereby what constitutes the strict ordering of a painting is the fact that the quantity of colour is its quality. If Matisse is able to declare that after having 'reflected at length on all the other painters, Seurat remains great', even in his grey canvases, this is because Matisse recognizes in Seurat the capacity to construct his objects scientifically, by means of quantitatively calculated dosages of light and shadow devoid of all 'picturesque' sentimentalism.

24. Matisse, *Écrits et propos sur l'art*, op.cit. 200.



Thus, ***Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte (1884-1886) uses the landscape as a stage set (far removed from any naturalist conception on account of its multiple perspectives marked by oblique and horizontal shadows) in order to set up, rigid, with the resolution of photographic grain, 'some forty characters [...] captured', in Fénéon's words, 'with a hieratic and summary line'²⁵. This suffices to conceive of this painting-manifesto as a post- and anti-impressionist radicalization of Manet's ***Déjeuner sur l'herbe – this phantasmatic projection mobilised against the 'picturesque' illusion of Impressionism. The philosopher Ernst Bloch evokes, with regard to this canvas, 'the pallid river', 'the lusterless brilliance of the atmosphere in the lifeless waters of the Seine on Sunday, the object of an equally lifeless contemplation', when 'everything seems to blur into a damp drabness, not only the world of work but every other world, and even every other object.' Bloch concludes that 'this type of bourgeois Sunday afternoon is the landscape of suicide in painting'²⁶. But this is also the orchestrated suicide of impressionist and/or expressionist painting, which manhandles the romantic ideal in a 'humanitarian' hermeneutic that shelters its delay beneath the pictorial cult of incompleteness.

At the level of the matter of expression, the pointillist technique is a way of carrying out the technical suicide of painting, the uniform function of the point being used scientifically to turn against 'pure' painting – which is soon to become a synonym for 'modernism' – those means which, from Manet onwards, are those of an Eye-Brain. Thus Fénéon writes of the Grande Jatte that 'in whatever part of it one examines there unfolds a monotonous and patient tapestry. Here, in effect, the painter's hand is of no consequence, trickery is impossible; there is no place for bravura. Let the hand be numb, but let the eye be agile, perspicacious, and knowing (savant). Whether ostrich plume or bale of straw, wave or rock, the handling of the brush is the same'²⁷. The exactitude of this last assertion (with regard to a facture that was actually far more varied than his contemporaries realized) matters less than the mechanical effect that is globally produced by means of a 'pointillism' that submits the brush to photography's Eye-Machine.

(One is reminded here of the rejection of the painterly hand which Duchamp claimed 'might hamper his mind'; the hand that is no longer there except as underlabourer for the exalted works of the brain ...)

Now, it is obvious that this technical suicide of painting is still a pictorial response to a crisis that is itself pictorial. In accordance with the reduction of sensation to what Taine had described as 'a group of molecular movements'²⁸, painting is now able to promote the molecular as ultimate bastion of the pictorial and thereby to give rise to an animism of pictorial matter as excitation and hallucinated production of the cerebralized eye. Borne by a landscape of rays, of diaphanous waves into which the hand might plunge, the canvas offers merely a superficial resistance to the inspection of the viewer, who insensibly takes over the distance from which Seurat painted.

25. F. Fénéon, *Les Impressionnistes en 1886*.

26. E. Bloch *The Principle of Hope* trans N. Plaice, S.Plaice, P.Knight. (London: Blackwell, 1986, 3 vols.) vol II, 814. Translation modified.

27. F. Fénéon, « VIIIe Exposition des Impressionnistes », *La Vogue*, 20-27 septembre 1886.

28. Cf. H. Taine, *De l'intelligence* (Paris: Hachette, 1870/1923), Vol. I, 7.

Yet this suppression of the 'distance' of the gaze, which is characteristic of self-hypnosis, this coloured screen transmuted into a retina, both, following Signac's demonstration, tend to actually 'provoke in us a living contemplation' by transfiguring the point (which Signac called 'uniform, dead, matter'), by modulating it in accordance with 'the brushstroke as divided, changing, living, light'²⁹. But what prevents the 'immense canvas' from yielding to the impressionist frenzy of the open air, even if only to order it, is that rarified atmosphere which imposes a lack, the airless void that is characteristic of 'pointillism'. Moreover, the Modern Age is far closer to the Outside than to the Open; what is at stake for it is an Outside whose declension is as the presence of the absent / absence of presence. For this Outside is 'phenomenologically' indissociable from the way in which its vertiginous vacuity excludes all communication between the different figures implicated. One may explore and inhabit the Open, but one does not thereby free oneself from the vertigo of the Outside that absorbs every character in an isolation that Manet was the first to experiment with, by melding the neutral autonomy of his perception with the vacuity of the painting. In Seurat, the multiplication of absent figurines will also accentuate the distance that holds them apart, hollowing out a space that light alone can irradiate, saturating it with its molecularized matter ... As absent to the Open as it is to the fullness of the Flesh and its incarnations of the distant, Seurat's art attests to the disincarnation of the world and to the spectral condition of the figures which haunt its theatre, suspended in the void.

This is particularly true of the preparatory sketch for ***L'enfant blanc (1884), adumbrated in crayon in anticipation of a colorized integration which will never really take place, as though lost in the roseate whiteness of an absent face (the only one to address itself to the spectator). All the crayon studies for the Grand Jatte seem likewise to have come out of a sort of 'photographic bath' wherein the characters melt like spectres, partially-developed indexical traces to which colour will confer a rhythm that is at once 'material' and 'cerebral'. Seurat adopts this vacuum, detached from all plenitude of being, outrageously diaphanous, the pure light of a matter which is no more than a gaseous energy imprisoning its characters in a large suspended mist. 'Gas has replaced the sun', warned the journalist Jules Janin in his article in favour of the daguerrotype³⁰. In this regard, we cannot ignore the fact that Duchamp will use gaslight when painting certain of his works (DDS, 221), or that he will seek to explore, albeit in a manner more mental than visual, the signifying possibilities of gas-spirit in order to animate the Large Glass with an oxymoronic 'signification of the Image'. If 'it can no longer be a question of a formal beauty' (Notes, 69) in Un dimanche après-midi à l'île de la Grande Jatte, this is because the immobility and closure of sign-forms is counteracted – from very close-up – only by those variations in the multicoloured brushstrokes that lay out the immanence of a mixture which is more haptic than optical – the promise of a new, of a final Song of the Earth for the eye in perdition. Nevertheless, Seurat's last work, Le Cirque, will open up another line of flight for colour.

29. P. Signac, D'Eugène Delacroix au néo-impressionnisme, op. cit., 122.

30. J. Janin, « Le Daguerrotype » [sic], L'Artiste, november 1838 – april 1839 ; cited by A. Rouillé, La Photographie. Entre document et art contemporain (Paris: Gallimard 2005), 36.

But before examining this work, we should finally pause to consider for a moment *Poseuses*: in the post-Olympia world, it is the featureless world of the deconstruction of the female nude through painting's exposure to photographic decoding.

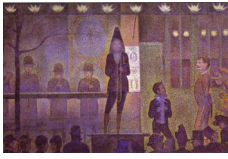
If the cliché-effect is reinforced by the neologism that gives the painting its title and provides it with its 'invisible colour', as well as by the contractual-commercial transaction of posing that one no longer hides, the photographic effect itself is sustained by the 'mechanical' facture and the 'grey' tonality that bathes these spectral nudities, which are executed in the fine grain of dense points, here used with a systematicity and on a scale never previously attempted.

Under the generically plural title, *Poseuses* (with no definite article), Seurat puts his name to a work that is absolutely alien through the way in which it sets up the tension between the pictorial and the photographic – something which will have immediate consequences for the status of the 'painting-within-the-painting' deployed in the background. Already scrambled by its association with popular imagery, the motif of the Grand Jatte loses in the latter what was left of its aura, entering into the cycle of reproduction of the 'subject' and the multiplication of those 'objects' that are characteristic of the age of their spectacular commodification (the age of department stores³¹ and prêt-à-porter, which might be read as ready-made...) Take for instance these two pairs of shoes, three umbrellas, three hats and other trinkets – fashionable articles if ever there were, with no value other than that of exhibiting the artifices of art – now overdetermined by Charles Henry's psychomathematical aesthetics – in a universe where 'the provocation of objects has replaced the proposition of things'³².

For it is indeed the 'poseuse' dressed with all the efficacy of an advertising logo in the artistic fashion of the Grand Jatte that I see undress in three stages in *Poseuses*; *Poseuses*, whose time is spread out on the canvas like the successive polaroid images of a 'stripping-bare' of the modern. Time is no longer the site for 'the unique appearance of the distant, however close it might be' (Benjamin again); rather, it bifurcates space into four virtual figures distributed between the represented space in the background of the painting and the supposedly 'real' space of the studio which is ordered by a 'chronophotographic' montage that lends the site an even more problematic character than that of the temporally unified re-presentation of *La Grande Jatte*. In the complex position of a surface to surface, temporal layers are superimposed through which the same model caught in bifurcating universes comes to stellate space by undoing and inverting the convention proper to the 'depth' of the painting, to the 'window' which here gives only onto a wall where the relation of presence to its representation is no longer what one thought it was. The outside is no longer situated with the viewer, facing the work, nor in the painter's studio, which has been here transferred onto the canvas, but within the vaporous garden of the *Grande Jatte* itself, which crosses over its white frame to impose the fine grain of dense points throughout the whole composition – right up to the frame of *Poseuses*, which is now lost, but for the first time painted by 'pointillating' the reactions of the neighbouring colours, so as to break from within the window opened onto the spectacle of the exterior; that device still maintained by the classical frame of impressionism: the white frame.

31. *Au bonheur des dames*, roman où Emile Zola présentait l'univers des grands magasins, avait été publié en 1883.

32. Henri Maldiney's formula in *Regard, Parole, Espace* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1973), 121.



Thus the spectres of La Grande Jatte will traverse the walls of the studio and depose and annul the traditional partitioning of the painting by expressing and exposing the porosity of surfaces which seemed to sustain it. An abyssal surface, collapsing towards an outside more distant than any external world because it no longer adheres to any support, except for a fine spray of light in the 'grey perspective of the studio'; pellicular image of an outside that is cerebral, atomic, microbiological and molecular, relating every work to something essentially free-floating, in the sense in which photography detaches the image from its referent, by submitting it to the regime of its reproducibility.

Yet it is still in the grey perspective of the studio that the loss of the subject (of the picture? Of the painting?) is best perceived. For if the model at the centre is indeed the true actress of her image (of the same stature), observing us looking at her, redoubled, putting on the pose of art like a true poseuse, and strolling, deposited in La Grande Jatte on account of a certain thinness in the treatment of the figure, the 'living' model is notoriously veiled or under-exposed in the sombre light of the studio with regard to the typological portrait of the strangely overexposed elegant lady. For, following the entire section of the painting re-presented in *Poseuses*, the luscious cocotte (or 'loose woman') is re- or over-pictorialized by the most material effect of her reproduction, which presents the aspect of the kind of flecked surface characteristic of certain new techniques of printing, particularly those of chromotypography (as used by the illustrated magazines of the 1880s).

By making his pictorial signs emerge from the dazzlement of all representation, Seurat displaces the work of the painter towards the apprehension of an outside immanent to what seeing captures and folds in upon itself in the hallucinatory reception that the retina reserves for the most artificial light. Because it is the most mysterious (or the most 'extra-terrestrial')³³ of Seurat's painting, it is probably with *Parade de cirque*, that 'dark masterpiece' exhibited by Seurat with *Poseuses*, that every pose is deposited in the strangest fashion.

The site of the *Parade* is delocalised, in favour of an erratic image that traverses the canvas like an imprint captured in its meshes: a plane unfastened from every mooring, from every 'foundation', and projected into the artificial fluttering of the outside. Whence the impression that everything is apposed upon the same indifferent plane wherein images that have been peeled and traced from very different universes become neighbours and are assembled in a tabular fashion. The painting amateur finds himself lost in a space that encloses him in its impenetrability and dissolves his all-too-physical presence, as though he himself suffered from or was extinguished by this deterritorialized plane. As though he in turn was drawn up by each of those phantoms whose hallucinatory stations have been fixed upon the canvas according to a back-lighting effect that rules out any visual entry into the scenographic field which is theatrically un-directed by the painter. Similarly, the painting, which also evokes a public execution, will be sustained by a light that is alien to every perceptive faith and 'devoid of any resonance with the physical world', according to a key expression of Duchamp's.

33. It was particularly with reference to *Parade* that Roger Fry brings up the idea of a vision which might be that of an 'extra-terrestrial visitor'.



With *Chahut* (1889-1890) and *Cirque* (1891), the last two large paintings featuring linear accents and such mysteriously abstract movements, arrested because of schematism, it is Edward Muybridge's 'electrophotographs' and Etienne-Jules Marey's 'chronophotographs' (studied extensively in Charles Henry's chromatic circle) with their pointillated graphs, it is the 'bands' and 'freeze-frames' used by Emile Reynaud in his Projective Praxinoscope, that become combined with Seurat's interest in the colour posters of Jules Chéret, which he collected: ne sont-elles pas 'en train de transformer les boulevards en une galerie d'art qui s'ignore?'³⁴. Mechanisation of the human; synthetic vision and decorative flatness; 'design' avant la lettre – these are the wellsprings of this poster-art, an art that is industrial and photogenic, an art of advertising, a caricatural art, which, it must be acknowledged with a contemporary critic, is 'above all an experimental interest'³⁵ as deployed by Seurat when the latter uses it to exhibit the 'demonic rhythm' (Lecomte, on *Cirque*) of 'contemporary ignominy' (G. Khan, on *Chahut*). This is the experimentation proper to an art of synthesis whose machinic essence relates the visibility/visuality of the image to its projection as calculated as a function of the stimulus of spectacle alone, disregarding all 'idealism' of reception, and all 'realism' of perception. We can conjoin two of Duchamp's key expressions and say that here the 'beauty of indifference' is conjugated as 'painting of precision'. (Note 77)

From this grey vision, which is hardly compatible with the manipulative effects sought for via the 'dynamogenics' of the advertising aesthetic proper to the society of the spectacle; from this grey-ness in which colour comes to be caught, and in which Seurat's extra-terrestrial distance is in play, the all-too-knowing painter who is accused of dispelling the Dream will nevertheless extract a wholly compelling effect of 'contrast' between the caricatural depictorialisation of the composition of the image (reduced to the schemas of the engineers of entertainment) and the pictorial pulsation of the 'mechanical' support invading the 'empty' spaces of the image: such is the 'delirious surject of life'³⁶, animating the 'background' of ****Chahut* and the 'ring' in *** *Cirque*.

These are zones whose animation, reminding us of what critics denounce as those 'colour-analyses that are too close to lab work', make the line flee, independently of any topographical function, between points, in the middle of points-colours, by recreating in the most striated space imaginable – in *Cirque*, everything is ruled by the whip – a nomad space of pure connections, inhabited by a machinic vital force which can only be called 'abstract'. Thus, the eye achieves a digital function and as Deleuze and Guattari write, 'the ground constantly changes direction, as in an aerial acrobatics'³⁷. Seurat's illumination, Seurat's hallucination: a sandy-coloured clown-acrobat somersaults before the top-hatted painter-spectator³⁸; he forms a mobile visual bloc with the broken line, abstract and mutant, of the same tone, sharply cut off at the bottom – in the doorway of the artist's entrance from which the Extraterrestrial will abruptly emerge, after a few days of delirium, at the age of thirty-one, the Hermes Trismegistus of modern art.

34. J. Russel, Seurat, tr. fr., (Paris : Thames & Hudson, 1989 [1965]), 234.

35. A. Alexandre, « Le Salon des Indépendants », Paris, 20 march 1891. From this pen, this is not exactly fulsome praise.

36. According to Huysman's remarkable phrase in an article on Chéret (J.-K. Huysmans, Paris, Tresse et Stock, 1889 ['Chéret']; republished. Paris: UGE 10/18, 1976, 317).

37. Cf. G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. B. Massumi London: Athlone 1988. p. 494 (and all of the section 'Aesthetic Model: Nomad Art' 492-500).

38. We recognise the painter Charles Angrand as being the bearded spectator in the first row of the *Cirque*. It is to Angrand that Seurat had confided: 'They see poetry in what I do. No, I apply my method, and that is all.'

De Duve translates for us: 'It was perhaps his status as dead father – I mean as someone who died young without having had the time to produce an oeuvre that would constitute an obstacle to subsequent artists – that allowed him to serve in such a displacement'³⁹ by Duchamp. A displacement that has decidedly rien à voir, nothing to do with the division of Duchamp's 'filial love' between his father and Cézanne (cf. *Portrait of the Artist's Father*, 1910), a subject and a style both lost.

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It is in *A l'infinif*, which collects notes contemporary with the conception of the Large Glass project, that we find Duchamp's thinking entering into a particular resonance with Seurat's theory-painting (even though the latter is not named). *A l'infinif* begins with a section entitled 'Spéculations', dated 1913. 'Spéculations' announces in its title the authentic speculative colour of the Large Glass, the colour of grey matter, we might say. This section opens with a well-known note in the form of an interrogation which constitutes the first proposition of the projected book: 'Can works be made which are not "of art"?' Put it simply, my thesis is that the possibility evoked by this interrogation of an exit from art by art had been somehow revealed to Duchamp by Seurat, when the latter opened up the mode of production of painting to the photographic mode of production, which 'artists' of the time took to be external to 'art'. Thus, it is still possible to make works, yet at the same time art's commercial externalisation means that it is no longer possible to do so like before. 'The figuration of a possible', according to Duchamp's expression, is henceforth coupled indissociably with what Duchamp calls 'the impossibility of making', which he writes as 'fer' – iron – even though we are meant to understand 'faire' – to make. The mordant irony of this undecidable coupling is perfectly inscribed in Duchamp's choice of an *** iron comb for a readymade in 1916. If the iron 'comb' [peigne] states the injunction to paint [peindre], then by stating it in iron [en fer] it simultaneously states the impossibility of making [de faire] of the painter who has selected a ready made object that takes the place of his making [son faire], since a comb 'combs' [en tant qu'un peigne, ça peigne] without the painter having painted it [sans que le peintre ne l'ait peint].

Subsequently, and still under the rubric of the interrogative introductory 'Spéculations', Duchamp develops several very brief statements about what he calls 'the question of shop windows'⁴⁰, which he concludes with this assertion: 'The shop window proof of existence of the external world'⁴¹. Although this formula may seem strange with regard to the initial question, it does provide a certain response to the question of art's opening onto the Outside which is posed in it. I cannot track all the duchampian associations suggested by this notion of the 'shop window'; which is to say, of a type of optical box sealed by a 'large glass'. But these associations lead directly to the ready-made, as is shown by that other formula a few lines further down: 'From the demands of shop windows, from the inevitable response to shop windows, there follows the making of a choice.' To make a ready-made is first and foremost to select an object, ultimately, one seen in a shop window, with the proviso that this choice not be made on the basis of any sort of taste or 'aesthetic' interest. It will be noted that the shop window also pertains to the mode of exposition of objects – or of people-merchandise in Seurat's painting – the shop windows of his time were the parades of the fair or the circus, but also the windows of the department stores where one saw displayed, in artificial light, all sorts of random, reproducible objects that are made to pose for 'poseuses' of all sorts.

39. De Duve, *Pictorial Nominalism*, 171.

40. *Ibid.*, 5.

41. *Ibid.*

To the question of knowing whether it is possible to make a work which would not be “of art”, the shop window answers with a proof of the existence of an external world that enjoins art, contested in its aura and unicity by industrialised objects, to find in these very objects ‘a field’ [du champ] for possible works-signs. Duchamp du signe... the very title under which Duchamp’s writings are collected in french.

If all this also directly concerns the relation between Duchamp and Seurat, it is because, amongst the new ready-mades to be found in shop windows, there are tubes of industrially-produced colours for painters, ready-made colours that the painter no longer has to crush and mix himself, and which can be used pure, straight from the tube. This means that Duchamp can take the tube of colour as the paradigm of a pictorial ready-made. De Duve rightly deduces from this that ‘the ready-made is of pictorial extraction’, and that the ‘tube of ready-made colour is a possible painting’ for a viewer who selects it as such (Nom pict, 250). It is precisely in relation to this point that the name Seurat appears explicitly in the undated posthumous note (from the years 30s-40s?) that provides the epigram for this paper: ‘The possible is an infra-thin – the possibility of many tubes of colour becoming a Seurat is the concrete “explanation” of the possible as infra-thin’. This is not the place to take up de Duve’s important commentary on this note. Seurat is the paradigm of the painter only insofar as he chooses the tubes of colours with which he works, but any other painter’s name would have done just as well. But in that case, asks de Duve, ‘Why Seurat?’ And he observes that the reasons for Duchamp’s interest in Seurat seem contradictory: on one hand Seurat is ‘the greatest scientific spirit of the nineteenth century’; on the other ‘the only man of the past who I really respect was Seurat, who made his large paintings like a carpenter, like an artisan’ (Nom pict 250 ff). This seems to bring us back, says de Duve, to the ‘traditional division between art as theoretical thought, “grey matter”, on one hand, and art as humble manual know-how, ‘the imbecility of the painter’, on the other.’ But the phrase where Duchamp speaks of Seurat as an artisan is immediately followed by this: ‘[Seurat] did not allow his hand to obstruct his mind. In every way, from 1912 onward, I decided to stop being a painter in the traditional sense’. ‘As if,’ de Duve continues, ‘the decision to abandon painting [...] as vocation, followed as a direct consequence of Seurat’s lesson: his mind and his hand worked independently. His hand only ignorantly executed the commands of the brain which programmed it.’ In the passage from one phrase to the other, Duchamp carries out an accelerated archaeology of his own work.

But the tenor of certain notes on colour in *A l’infinif* resonates fairly unequivocally with Seurat’s fundamentally tonal conception of colour, so that it seems worthwhile investigating, on the same terrain, the archaeological relation that links Duchamp to Seurat. These texts date from a period when Duchamp still conceived *The Bride Stripped Bare By her Bachelors*, Even as a painting, or rather, as a sort of anti-painting whose paradoxical modalities he was seeking to define. He will find a way out of the aporia to which he had been led by these notes through what he will call a ‘pictorial nominalism’ – and it will be language, or rather the games of the signifier, which will provide the motive force for a work which would no longer be art without calling itself anti-art.

In a section of *A l’infinif* called ‘Colour’, Duchamp speculates on how one might make a painting quite reminiscent of Seurat. He thinks he could start by adding luminous values in black and white to a pre-existing drawing, and then by covering them over, respectfully, with the corresponding val-

ues of colour (DDS, p 111ff). Here we are very close to Seurat's idea, which we discussed above, since for him also the contrasts of hues are overdetermined by tonal contrasts. All the more so since Duchamp will go even further by concluding thus: 'Over this second coat, shade anew in black and white (spit)'⁴². This return in fine to the tonal values so dear to Seurat is indeed a way of spitting on colour, in particular on the colours of Fauvism. Generally speaking, it is a question of degrading colour so as to evacuate it as much as possible of all aesthetic quality by proscribing any sort of naturalism. We will not be surprised if at the end of this section, Duchamp is led to declare: 'There is a certain inopticity, a certain cold consideration, these colourings affecting only imaginary eyes, in this exposure'⁴³. This cannot fail to evoke Seurat's machinic eye, coldly operating with colouring-points which would not evoke objects in a natural light, thereby depriving the painting of the retinal opticality proper to real eyes and addressing itself only to the artificial retina 'of imaginary eyes'. But the evocation is vitiated by the fact that Duchamp can only envisage a nominalism of colours, since he adds in parentheses after this phrase: 'The colours about which one speaks', followed here by the subsequent explanatory note: 'I mean the difference which exists between the fact of speaking of a red and that of looking at a red.' Here we can gauge the full distance of the linguistic turn which separates the painter Seurat from the nominalist Duchamp.

Duchamp discusses colours in another important section of *A l'infinifit* entitled 'Appearance and Apparition'. However, since we have no time here to analyze it in detail, we shall only retain its general significance and bearing. For Duchamp, 'appearances' are those 'sensory data enabling one to have an ordinary perception of [an] object'⁴⁴. It is with this image-form as with all aesthetic-form that Duchamp intends to break by situating art/anti-art in an outside that is irreducible to them. What must surface in the painting is not appearance but 'apparition', which he defines 'as a kind of mirror seemingly used for the making of this object, like a mould, but this mould of the form is not itself an object'⁴⁵; and again: 'by mould is meant: from the point of view of form, and colour, the negative (photographic)'⁴⁶.

This notion of the mould is fundamental for Duchamp: the mould is not a real object here, but that which will allow us to think the work as the production of an art/anti-art 'object', not on the basis of its appearance but on the basis of something like its negative (on the photographic model – indicating the detachment of the object from its concrete material support). The mould as 'negative' is thereby defined as a 'generator'(DDS, 122). It allows Duchamp to place the 'making' of the work no longer in appearances, but in their retreat, beyond the retinal.

Ultimately then, Seurat and Duchamp do not situate themselves on the same plane of enunciation, and do not use the photographic paradigm in the same way. Seurat's eye-machine collects the energy of luminous molecules in the form of colour-points, just like the operation of the photographic apparatus – moreover, the painter goes so far as to attribute to these colour-points a quantum of vital energy, which Matisse will perceive as closely-related to that which endows his colour-forces with their environmental power of expansiveness.

42. Duchamp, *A l'infinifit*, op.cit., 27. Translation modified.

43. Ibid., 53.

44. Ibid., 55.

45. Ibid., 55.

46. Ibid., 54.

Faced with the colour-machine that Seurat began to put into motion, Duchamp sets up the grey machinery of a constructivism of the signifier. He projects the generator-paradigm of the photographic negative onto a mental plane, he thinks in terms of instants of thoughts, of infra-thinness, of 'the colours about which one speaks' rather than real-material colours. The result is a 'pictorial nominalism' (DDS, 111) that signifies the proliferating voiding of the Image-object of/outside of art as the inaesthetic foundation of the postmodernity that is at once de-monstrated and dismantled as such, for the very first time, in art-anti-art.



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